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An Appraisal of the Benefits of Vibrant Alumni Relations at the University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

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Abstract:

This paper discussed the benefits that University of Education, Winneba stands to derive if certain measures are put in place to harness the potential of its alumni relations outfit. In the presentation, a general outlook of an alumni relation in a University was given detailing how properly organized alumni relation impacts on its alma mater. The importance of alumni associations in universities were discussed, some of which included the fact that former students give financial support to the school, assist in the employment of students of the school where they the alumni are instrumental in engaging new graduates, help in career guidance and mentorship, assist to bring globalization to the school, serve as ambassadors to their schools, and bring badly needed expertise to the operation of the school. Above all, ideas that could be adopted to revamp alumni relations in the University of Education, Winneba were emphasised.

Keywords: *Serve as ambassadors, mentorship, career guidance, emphasised*

1. Introduction

This current work focuses on exploring the alumni factor and its relevance in institutional advancement with focus on the University of Education, Winneba. It is established in the literature that Alumni Relations remain a key component in the visibility of institutions of higher learning (Iskhakova et al., 2017; Ebert et al. 2015; Moore & Kuol 2007) among others. In view of this alumni being triggers of institutional advancement, Alma Hub (2018) asserts that an engaged, supportive alumni network has a major role to play in any institution's success. Alumni relation is an important asset for any educational institution wanting to stand out from the domestic and international competition. Apart from the institution, good alumni relationships bring numerous benefits to the students and the alumni too. The institution should make efforts to keep the graduates engaged and informed on the progress of the institution, even after they leave the campus.

This is factual and uncontested because Community Zapp (2017) adds that in reality, when managed effectively, Alumni community is a crucial opportunity for institutions and students alike to build their profile and get real life benefits since an institution's Alumni are the best ambassadors of that institution to the outside world. Their successes and achievements represent concrete outcomes of an institution's efforts. Moreover, a consistent and deep engagement with Alumni will ensure that the institution's image they project is both positive and current. Additionally, *consistent and quality relationship would be mutually beneficial to both the Alumni and the educational institution much beyond what meets the eye. It is evident that a vibrant Alumni Relation at the University of Education, Winneba is going to be very beneficial in many respects.*

Good alumni relationships bring many benefits to both the institution and its alumni, as discussed below:

2. Importance of Alumni Relations in a University

2.1. Support System

As graduates of the institution, alumni have a special connection with the university and so are likely to be some of its more loyal supporters. An engaged alumni network allows the university to benefit from the skills and experience of our graduates, by offering their support to our students, to the institution itself and to the alumni. If we keep them properly informed and engaged, alumni are our most loyal supporters and our best ambassadors, offering invaluable marketing and promotion across their personal and professional networks.

A strong Alumni Relations outfit would bring to a University the support the alumni would give to current students of the institution. It has been amply stated that alumni could provide placements, internships, mentoring and career advice to the current students. The University could also get sponsorship for students' projects, research or courses.

It should be noted that most programmes of study if not all, require that students go on attachment during vacations. In an attempt to get placements, the alumni network of a University would be one of the biggest sources of placement opportunities to the students. Alumni can help students be placed at their respective organisations.

2.2. Offering Expertise

Talented alumni will likely have a wealth of experience and skill to share with current students via talks and newsletters. In certain cases, this could go even further with alumni offering to practically support students in work placements and help them launch their careers. Creating an engaged alumni network is beneficial for an institution because engaged graduates are much more likely to want to give back to the institution by coming back and sharing their experience with prospective and current students (Cannon, 2015).

2.3. Financial Benefits

Alumni Associations give back to society by contributing financially to their alma mater. In real life situations, alumni could provide financial support directly in the form of donations or indirectly through introductions to potential donors and active participation in peer-to-peer fundraising. There are several examples in Ghana and outside the country.

A recent and a worthy example is by one Mr. Lawrence Addo, an alumnus of the University of Ghana who donated Gh¢100,000.00 towards the Students Financial Aid. This is an indication that when the Alumni Relations Office is properly organised and resourced to work, there would be better returns in the end. In the same breadth, Alma Hub (2018) indicates that Alumni Associations encourage donations from among their membership and other philanthropic organisations and individuals. It emphasises that alumni often have a sense of belonging and connection with the institution more than anybody else has, and thus, help sustain their alma maters through donations and funding.

They also tend to contribute generously in fundraising events and student initiatives. Financial help from an institution's alumni can enable it to improve its infrastructure, offer scholarships, fund student projects, provide advanced facilities and equipment for teaching and research. With these in mind, developing strong alumni relations and keeping the University's Alumni connected helps immensely. Thus, active and cohesive alumni build a strong brand for the College/School. Owing to this, it is imperative for an educational institution to play a great role in bringing its alumni community together and make them feel involved. Once the alumni feel recognised and involved in the decision-making processes of the University, the alumni members would not feel reluctant to contribute financially whenever they are called upon to do so.

Therefore, keeping a close connection with the alumni, and continuing to recognise them for their excellence is one of the sure-shot ways institutions can grow their community and continue to receive monetary support from alumni. Because of the dedication and gratitude many alumni have for their institution, they are often generous with fundraising efforts.

2.4. Career Opportunity and Mentorship

Alumni network has a real life benefit for current students. Alumni, sometimes, donate their valuable time to offer career support to current students through innovative schemes such as Professional Mentoring Programme, work shadowing and professional networking opportunities (Davis, 2019). These go a long way to enhance the students' experience and give them that competitive edge in today's tough jobs market.

A vibrant Alumni Relations in a University can help in better career opportunities for students. In this sense, an engaged Alumni Network can provide an institution and the alumni an opportunity to connect with experienced alumni willing to share their experience and best practices in their field of expertise. To make this a reality, institutions and alumni can post job openings and online resources for job-seekers. In the same way, an engaged alumni network also offers mentorship opportunities that help junior alumni to get in touch with experienced alumni and learn new skills. This calls into question the issue of networking, which is in vogue in modern times. In short, networking opportunities abound where Alumni Relations have been institutionalised. To this end, Alma Hub notes that one of the major objectives of any alumni network is to provide a common platform for the alumni to interact with each other, with the current students and the institution. It provides mentorship opportunities for the current students where they can learn from a University's alumni's experience and skills. The alumni can connect with each other one to one or in groups.

2.4.1. Globalisation

Globally, most institutions of higher learning consider alumni relations as very crucial in their continuous existence and relevance to social development. Towards this end, several reasons for maintaining Alumni Relations Office have been adduced. According to Agrawal (2017), a good alumni network benefits the institution, current students as well as its alumni. It is a win-win situation for everyone.

In many instances, alumni are in a position to become international ambassadors to the institution. Some former students volunteer to be a point of contact for their institution to support in recruitment activities. They are invaluable in helping to provide prospective students with real insight into their alma mater and may help them confirm their decision to choose that institution.

2.5. A Changing Market

As the number of graduates from an educational institution grows up and new alumni emerge, as such the institutions should find ways to engage them and use these alumni to market the school to the larger society. Obviously, there would be a whole new generation of alumni to consider in trying building a solid alumni cadre for a particular institution. In short, strategies to be used may need to be updated and modified for a new audience. In this instant, the alumni relations officer may need to try to engage the alumni through different means depending on their skills, interests, and where they are currently in their life. To this end, it is always good to embrace technology as an effective means of

communication. Things like birthday emails are easy to set up and may bring some very wonderful responses from alumni who are grateful that their university still thinks about them.

2.6. Ambassadors

Alumni Associations are ambassadors in those alumni who are the best evangelists of any school. They create the institution's reputation, which relies in large part on how successful graduates are in the real world. This process is self-feeding as well. If a school becomes well-known for producing graduates that are intelligent, innovative, and effective in their fields, then its reputation will grow. Consequently, the proposition is that newest graduates will have better job prospects because they went to a well-known school, and the process is likely to continue.

2.7. Improve Teaching and Learning

A vibrant Alumni Relations could help improve teaching and learning in an educational institution. This viewpoint is championed by Community Zapp (2017), which states that consciously organised alumni could help to bring overall improvement in quality of teaching by sharing their real life feedbacks with the institutional leadership. Additionally, they could provide case study materials and give guest lectures to bring real life experiences into the classrooms. They could help greatly in tracer studies to enhance the quality of teaching and learning. Alternatively, after their post-graduate studies, most of them could be employed to teach in that University and since they were trained at that place, they would give off their best, thus, enhancing the quality of instruction there.

2.8. Successful Experience

In her advocacy for a stronger and formidable Alumni Relations, Andrews (2012) says that an effective alumni relationship begins with providing a successful experience to the students. The attachment that alumni have towards their alma mater depends on the effort that an institution takes to make their days memorable as students. Furthermore, Andrews (2012) urged institutions to develop a passionately successful alumni relations' effort, aimed at an enthusiastically successful student experience.

One thing to keep in mind is that they are students for one to four years or more and alumni for the rest of their lives, yet it is their years on campus (or perhaps online) that form the foundation of their relationship with the school. It is worthy of note that some schools already do this well by integrating alumni into orientation activities, hosting an alumni event early in a students' campus career, help students study abroad programmes, connect with alumni in other countries, connect students and alumni for career mentoring, and working with student clubs. In addition, some schools co-locate alumni relations and student affairs teams towards proper students' engagement for development of the institution.

According to the University of Cyprus Alumni Relation Office, this office should have two main roles to play. They are Altruistic and Cynical Approaches. The Altruistic Approach is a situation whereby the Alumni Relations Office is to 'serve' anyone who has a relationship with the University and would like to maintain that relationship, whilst the Cynical Approach is to 'involve' anyone who has the possibility to support the University in any way. In simple terms, the University through its Alumni Relations Office should maintain a close relationship with its alumni for a couple of reasons, which are that, the Alumni:

- Certify the academic programmes of the institution
- Promote the university to potential students
- Create a network of volunteers
- Offer the connection between the content of the academic programmes being offered (teaching) with research and
- Offer their support and create goodwill

In sum, Alumni are the contributors of the University's reputation and for the alumni; the University is part of their identity.

3. Revamping UEW's Alumni Relations Office(s)

The relevance of an Alumni Relations Office in any University's governance structure has amply been emphasised in the preceding paragraphs. It is, thus, pertinent to remind Management of the University of Education, Winneba to re-organise its Alumni Relations outfit to prepare itself and receive the benefits that come with the effective operations of that office. Across the world and locally in Ghana, most of the reputable Universities have Alumni Relations Offices that oversee the activities of alumni of the institution. For instance, the University of Cyprus, University of Cape Coast, University of Ghana and Kwame Nkrumah of University of Science and Technology have Alumni Relations Offices that coordinate activities of alumni. The University of Education, Winneba has an Alumni Relations Association, whose activities are currently coordinated by the Office of Institutional Advancement but much more needs to be done to re-invigorate it. This call is being made at this time because paragraph 2.6.8 of the Fifth Corporate Strategic Plan of the University caters for the Office for Institutional Advancement, which is the parent department for Alumni Relations of the University. Based on this, it is highly recommended that Management tasks the Alumni Relations Officer who is coordinating the activities of that office to come up with a re-organisation action plan to ensure that the benefits that accrue from vibrant alumni relations are ultimately derived to the University, since these benefits are numerous and varied. Apart from the main Alumni Relations Officer at Winneba, there should be scheduled officers for Alumni relations on the constituent campuses and if possible, Regional Study Centres to ensure that efforts are harnessed for effective coordination of alumni activities.

For the Alumni Relations Office to work to achieve objectives set in the Corporate Strategic Plan, it is suggested the Officer in charge of Alumni Relations should be tasked to do a couple of things. Firstly, the recently graduated Classes (2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021, which sum up to 47,573) should be used to form the nucleus of the Alumni Association of UEW, in addition to those that the Office of Institutional Advancement has already registered. This should be done immediately in collaboration with the Webmaster, since the Webmaster would create an Alumni portal where these prospective alumni would register such as what exists on KNUST, University of Ghana and UCC websites. On the same score, the Webmaster in collaboration with Alumni Relations Office would open social network platform where all Alumni past and present can converge and discuss issues of common interest. This idea exists in most of the reputable institutions such as the University of London and many others.

Secondly, the Alumni Relations Offices outside the Winneba and Ajumako Campus must be made to coordinate the request for transcripts, referee reports, letters of attestations, English Proficiency for alumni. This suggestion is being made because most alumni stay far away from the campuses and it is difficult for them to come personally to the campuses to request for these services. This can be done when the necessary payments have been made with the cash offices or banks where applicable and receipts scanned and sent by email to the Alumni Email Portal for onward processing by the Academic Affairs and the appointed Lecturers in the case of referee reports. What students go through trying to get referee reports these days is not palatable. We can make it easier for them even if they have to come for the reports themselves. What is being proffered here is that service delivery to the University's clientele, especially current and past students should be enhanced. This can be done using the Alumni Relations Offices at the Study Centres and in the Zonal Offices, as and when they are set up.

It must be noted that not long ago, Academic Affairs (Winneba and Ajumako) generate Transcript on the same day at a special fee. However, if for some technical reasons, the transcripts or referees' report cannot be prepared in a day, the applicant must be told in advance, so that that person does not trek to the campus and stay there the whole day, only to be told it will not be ready. All these inconveniences could be curtailed by routing the requests through the Alumni Relations offices outside the Winneba and Ajumako campuses before the alumnus decides to come for the report, letter of introduction, attestation, English proficiency or transcript, it would be ready for taking. If it has to be posted, the Alumni Relations Office staff would follow up on behalf of the applicant and ensure posting is done and feedback given. These measures are not difficult to practicalize in my very humblest of opinions. I can recall that someone has written on the need to send soft copy of transcripts to Institutions on behalf of applicants; this can be facilitated by the Alumni Relations officers by following up at the Academic Affairs in Winneba or Ajumako. It is believed that when we begin to do things like this, it would be easy to mobilise alumni both present and past for the purpose for which the Alumni Association is formed. Lastly, the Alumni Relations Office could assist the Admissions Office to respond to admission enquiries and queries relative to admission requirements and admission status of applicants, particularly during admission periods. This means Alumni Relations officers must be taken through the rudiments of admission processes in respect of admission periods, programmes on offer and career prospects of courses studied. Alternatively, the questions could be collated and sent to the appropriate officers for answers; and then feedback was sent to those who posed those questions. We have to ensure that we become customer friendly University, and thus enhance our visibility across the nation and beyond. What is being suggested here is doable because of modern technology and communication software which I think and believe the ICT Directorate can help make viable in the short to medium term. I want 'US' to evolve a locally grown solution towards enhancing Alumni Relations in the University of Education, Winneba.

Certainly, what I have been proffering is clearly in tandem with what the University has enshrined in its Fifth Corporate Strategic Plan, page 13. This particular paragraph states that in the course of the 2019-2023 Corporate Strategic Plan period, the Office will pursue the following:

- Set up sub-alumni offices in all the constituent campuses to be able to reach all our alumni,
- Set up Distance Education Centre alumni groups/branches,
- Launch regional alumni groups/branches,
- Secure a comprehensive alumni database,
- Pursue aggressive membership/branch drive, and
- Embark on diverse alumni events.

This is exactly what I am espousing and urging Management of institute to actualize the ideas incorporated in the University's Corporate Strategic Plan document. The time to start the implementation of those aspects of the 2019 Corporate Strategic Plan is now.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important to reiterate some of the key factors why Alumni Relations should be institutionalised in most Universities and other institutions of higher learning. No doubt, alumni are the brand-ambassadors of the institution from which they graduated. It can be observed that many institutions declare the list of their notable alumni as a way of connecting their successes with what the University has provided them. However, in this era of social networking, connecting with an institution's past students does not stop with this.

This is because most institutions of higher learning have realised how a strong and a positive relationship with their alumni can benefit them socially, academically and professionally. It is these obvious benefits that UEW Management is being urged to reckon by revitalizing the Alumni Relations Office. When Management decides to consider the recommendations in this paper, it should be borne in mind that these days, one can find numerous alumni groups on various social networking platforms with many active members in them. Based on this fact, UEW Alumni Relations Office

must harness this social media presence of the UEW alumni for activities that would be beneficial for students, University Management and the alumni in general.

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